

**A letter to J.M. Conrad ... on slavery / by Nathan Lord.**

A LETTER TO J. M. CONRAD, ESQ., ON SLAVERY, BY NATHAN LORD, PRESIDENT OF DARTMOUTH COLLEGE.

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To the Editor of the Richmond Whig.

I hand you herewith a letter which I received a few days ago from President Lord of Dartmouth College, in New Hampshire. The high moral and literary character of Dr. Lord, together with the responsible position which he occupies, and the facilities he has for "knowing whereof he affirms," it seems to me ought to entitle this letter to a wide-spread publication, and in this I find my justification for placing it in your hands.

Having been a student in the Institution over which he presides, and believing him eminently qualified to speak wisely of the questions here discussed, I determined to communicate with him, and now offer his response to you for the benefit of all who may feel interested to read the sound, conservative views of one of New England's intelligent, thinking men. I sought it not for publication, but am sure its author will not feel aggrieved at seeing it in print, if, as I think it will, its publication shall result in good.

Very respectfully, J. M. CONRAD.

Richmond, Va., Dec. 8, 1859.

**LETTER.**

Dartmouth College, Dec. 1, 1859.

TO J. M. CONRAD, ESQ.

Dear Sir:—

Your favor of the 23d ult. is at hand. It proposes a difficult question, viz: "What is the predominant sentiment among your population with regard to the recent invasion of our soil, and interference

with our institutions? Do they value the Union as it is? And, if so, do they not feel that dissolution must inevitably follow such demonstrations?"

The question, however, is difficult, mainly in view of its relation to other questions which you have not asked. The raid at Harper's Ferry, as an isolated transaction, is viewed, by all but a few fanatics among our people, with mingled feelings of disgust at its folly, and indignation at its wickedness. It were almost doubtful whether it should be treated with a strait-jacket for its madness, or a rope for its method, were it not that the wheel of justice is so often turned aside upon plausible pretences of insanity. But, at best, it is abhorrent to all our commonly received ideas. Such demonstrations startle us the more from their direct or incidental tendency to precipitate general disorganization and disunion. On that account the vast majority of our people would stamp them with reprobation, and join you in battle, if that were necessary, to suppress them.

But the mad attempt of Brown and his coadjutors cannot be wisely viewed apart from its relations. It is complicated with all the questions of slavery which now so much confuse and agitate the country, and which, as I sometimes fear, will not be settled without a servile and civil war. In that view public sentiment is more divided, and the division awakens more concern among thoughtful men.

According to my judgment, public opinion at the North is mostly represented, in this respect, by these several classes:—

1. Those who study the subject of slavery by the method of faith, in the lights of moral government as reflected from natural and revealed religion. These are mostly persons of grave pursuits in Church or State, who look at things as they are known by Scripture and experience. They regard all men as depraved beings, guilty and condemned by the law of God, yet reprieved by the Divine goodness, placed providentially in various states of probation, according to their diversities of character as individuals, nations or races and subjected to different degrees of restraint and discipline by governments in the family, State, or Church, as constituted and appointed by God, to serve the ends of a probationary state. Slavery is one of the constituted forms of government, and its powers and duties are accredited and described both in the Old and New Testaments. It is wisely adapted to the ruder portions of mankind, and, in some conditions of the social state, necessary to its best interests, or to its preservation, during the appointed time. The necessity grows out of the imbecility and untractableness of these ruder classes. Some hold it to be a judicial necessity entailed upon a particular disorderly race, as a sign of the Divine displeasure for peculiar wickedness, as signified by the curse of Canaan, and having analogy in the judgments now for a long time inflicted upon the Jews. Yet mercy is mingled with judgment, and the doomed derive benefits which they would not, or could not have received, but for such a providential ordering of affairs. The discipline may serve

eventually to a higher reformation and lifting up than could otherwise have been possible during the present derangement of the moral system.

But this gives no right to superiors to oppress and afflict inferiors injuriously, for their selfish ends; and all abuses of a right institution react, providentially, to the casting down of oppressive and unscrupulous rule; for God is no respecter of persons. He honors the men who, like the Patriarchs and early Christians, use his ordinances agreeably to their design, but punishes the evil doers. And his government over individuals and nations is one and uniform in this respect, in all ages.

Men of the class here described are sprinkled all over New England. Their insensible influence serves to regulate, in some measure, the confused masses, and to counteract the destructive movements of the insane. But they are not comparatively numerous, and could not, as things are, greatly affect the generality. They are looked upon with distrust, are frequently maligned, and their conciliatory influence is opposed. Their reasonings are often condemned without examination, criticised without judgment, or misrepresented for bad popular effect. For that reason they retire, for the most part, to their secret places, and wait to be justified by the providence of God.

These men are filled with grief and indignation at the late disturbances in Virginia. They regard all such attempts, by whomsoever conceived, or stimulated, or carried on, as unchristian, immoral and impolitic, having no tendency but to exaggerate the very evils, real or imaginary, which they profess to remedy. That abuses of slavery exist at the South they deny not, just as they acknowledge the manifold abuses which exist in the social system of New England. But they see nothing to justify the vituperation and incendiarism which are excited by infidels and fanatics at the North, and are encouraged by more unprincipled politicians, or hood-winked teachers of morals and religion. Good and evil exist in our institutions as well as yours, and we are both inexcusable if we bite and devour one another because of the bad accidents which belong to our respective different organizations or administrations of the social state. You might as well lay us waste with fire and sword for our errors and sins, as we you for yours, and, for aught I know, in this case, with greater reason, inasmuch as there are probably fewer men at the South who hold slaves injuriously than there are infatuated men at the North who subject themselves and others, as far as their influence extends, to the worse yoke of wilful ignorance, intoxicating delusions and malignant passions.

2. The subjects of this intellectual and moral servitude constitute another class at the North. I mean, the wild men about whom you do not inquire, and of whom I need not speak particularly. They are known and read of all men. Their history is the same in all countries and periods, — the history of a wanton imagination, unscrupulous ambition, bewildered judgment, immoderate vanity and self-conceit, or fiery passions ever driving them onwards to a fatal plunge.

Yet they are not numerous, probably not as numerous or powerful as you imagine. There are scarcely five in a village, and fewer in the outside districts. They are mostly congregated in the cities, where they can collect a rabble by their fiery eloquence, and sometimes more decent people, whose vagrant curiosity, or love of indiscriminate excitement, masters their discretion. They are not otherwise formidable than as a knot of burglars and incendiaries, who sometimes create a panic through a town or county by a few midnight outrages that for a while elude detection. That there are not laws for such delirious men argues, as yet, a moral soundness of the people. The public voice measurably controls them. Time may come when they will require forcible restraint. I sometimes almost fear it. But I should fear that then all laws would lose their power, and we should begin the horrors of a civil war, which certainly many politicians hitherto have not seemed anxious to prevent. These caterers to the unholy sympathies and antipathies of men do what they can to precipitate that result. And they have a wide field in our third and largest class.

### 3. This class is the great body of the people.

Strictly this class should be largely subdivided; for it is composed of all varieties, from learned and professional men to operatives in the mills and day-laborers in the fields. In no part of the world are there greater diversities of sects and parties, of temperaments and tastes, of fashions, pursuits and interests, than 9 at the North. All are shrewd, intelligent, capable and earnest. They study books, read the newspapers, talk politics, and discuss morals and theology. They differ, dispute, separate and quarrel. But as yet they have a common *vinculum* that holds them, viz: The Constitution and the laws. To these all have a principled and strong attachment, as the old Jews had to the Ark of the Testimony. With all their differences in matters of Church or State, and occasional heats of political or religious controversy, they meet with one accord on the Fourth of July, and celebrate fraternally the Nation's Freedom. They would lay aside all the jealousies of faction, and competitions of rival interests, and fight together for their *magna charta*. That this bond has been somewhat weakened by unprincipled demagogues who have extensively subsidized and prostituted the Press, and misappropriated the influence of place, is out of question. The work of demoralization has been going on, to the great alarm of considerate, conscientious and patriotic men. But it has gone on unperceived in general. The people in mass are unconscious of any want of zeal for their chartered institutions. They were never more inflated than at present with the dream of progress, never more exultant over their image of the nation's destiny. Their false guides have never presumed to avow, in terms, what may have been the aim of some of them, or what has been their unconscious drift—the revolutionizing of their country. Any show of this would now destroy them. As yet our general soundness is out of question.

But, among all the varieties of this large class, what has struck me with the greatest concern, in reference to the future, is the almost universal confusion of ideas on the subject in hand. Babel was hardly worse confounded. Slavery is our great theme. Its incidents furnish our topic for the press, the pulpit, the lyceum, the table and the street. But its true nature, design, uses and abuses, its political and ecclesiastical relations, its history, and its bearings upon all the related interests of the country and the world, and especially its more vital concern with the moral government of God—all these become mere occasions of increasing bewilderment. Our principles are unsettled, reasoning is without a guide, the sentiments are disordered, discourse is warm but fickle and unmeaning, a moral and practical uncertainty reigns in which men see double, and are scared by shadows and chimeras. The generality yet mean well; but their faculties are clouded; their sun is darkened by the steaming vapors of an unbelieving, visionary and impracticable philosophy; they cannot take an observation, and the winds and currents are setting them upon the rocks. Slavery is the terrific spectre of the storm; it scares them from all their natural propensities, and still more from a Divine guidance and reliance, and they resort to all manner of spiritualistic subtleties and conjurations, seeking deliverance where they only plunge into greater confusions and more formidable dangers.

The true account of these alarming irregularities, in my judgment, is this, viz: that above the constitution and the laws, and independent of the Bible and experience, and now, to a great extent, the conceited interpreter of both, a dreamy, speculative fallacy, a higher law, a fiction of the imaginary universal reason, an ultra Divine instinct, insensibly gains possession of the common mind. We owe it mainly to your own Jefferson, for whose sake you should bear, as long as possible, with our infirmities. He was caught by the illuminism and cosmopolitism of his times, and embodied his chimera in the "*glittering generalities*" of the Declaration of Independence. That gilded falsehood has betrayed us. Your inherited slavery, whatever evils may attend it, was a merciful antidote to the atheistic poison which has crept through all our veins. It virtually enthrones *humanity*. It makes every child a man, every man great, and every great man God. It is willingly ignorant of our common fall and ruin, the entailed selfish tendencies of every individual mind, and the consequently disturbed relations of the social state. It perceives not that God has given an essential, personal, characteristic equality to no two creatures of his hand, or organic relations of his constituted orders; that no rights of fallen man are absolute, but dependent on his good behavior in society, and that happiness is not his legitimate end and aim, but the honor of the Creator—not an ordained consequence of following a self-determined will, but of faith in the Divine word, and obedience to the Divine commands; that society has no inherent moral *vis vitæ* to evolve itself into a perfect state by a natural process of development, but waits, in the use of the appointed means of a probationary state, for the restitution promised by the Spirit; that the outward ordinances of government, and law and christianity, can only give a passing fertility to the superficial soil, but renovation comes only

by breaking up the fallow ground of the inner man; that any other view of man or of society, in the present state, can produce nothing but a spiritual inflation swelling us with self-sufficiency, and firing us with ambition, reducing us to mere competitors and strugglers for an ideal good, and at length exploding all our gaudy visions of a millennial Commonwealth. It is this speculative fiction, not of our Puritan but our revolutionary fathers, whom we blame, however, not for revolutionizing society, but for re-constructing it on a false philosophical idea; it is this humanitarian, pantheistic image—the unknown God whom we ignorantly worship—that insensibly weakens our hold on the Divine realities and consequently unsettles our foundations. It has already, as in the second class above described, turned liberty into licentiousness, and loosened some foul tongues in blasphemy, “setting on fire the course of nature, and set on fire of hell.”

However self-evident the fundamental axiom of our Declaration may have seemed to its illuminated framers, or however true it would be if men were Divine, and existed as a community of Gods, or as developments of the Divine essence, in our present actual world it can work out only confusion and derangement. It has in fact, done so wherever experience has tried, or history has described it. Yet, it is the political Gospel of New England. True, it is contradicted and countervailed to a great extent, by the Constitution and the laws, and all the necessities of a social state, and could not be otherwise if we would have a social state at all. Yet the fantastic image figures in the common mind. It captivates the common fancy. It expounds as far as it can, at will, the literal statutes and decrees, which are for the government of life. It works unseen in our speculative theology, and shapes that now ductile science to the visionary idea of the ability, the capability and the perfectibility of man and infects it with a sentimental universalistic element that deprives it of its former power. It reduces our ethics to the level of mere expediency, and proposes utility and happiness as the end of life, and a cunning policy as its rule. It degrades our politics to an eager subserviency, not to a righteous and benevolent ordering of affairs, but the securing of spoils to intriguing and factious partisans. The pulpit, extensively secularized by the press, and the press encouraged by the pulpit, use it often, indeed, from generous instinct, but more for the ends of an ephemeral popularity among the undiscerning portions of society, under the desecrated names of patriotism, philanthropy, and religion. It is our idol. The painted goddess of Liberty flaunts on our high places. We do her reverence, and go away drunk with the wine of her spiritual fornication. Without a return to the first principles of natural and revealed religion, we could not long survive the unperceived destructive influence of this latterday sophistry and chicane. Its consequences unchecked could only be the deterioration of one of the best people of the earth, the loss of their national freedom, and probably a last demonstration to the universe of the folly of human wisdom and the weakness of human strength.

This is not cheerful prophesying. But from my point of view, I can see nothing better in the distant future. Effects will follow their natural causes. We have gone on snapping our cords for fifty years, and settling into successive stages of spiritual idolatry. The elements of discord were never so active as they are at present, and as to any earthly recovering power who can locate or define it? I see it not in the people who are every year increasing their confusions. I see it not in the leaders who are more ambitious and unscrupulous as their conscious power accumulates. I see it not as it ought to be in our representative institutions of learning and religion; for they gradually yield here a little and there a little, to the outside pressure, and under specious pretences accommodate their measures to the spirit of the times. The current sweeps along. What can we hope for when 13 not revelation but philosophy is the guide of life, and her professed aim is not the humbling but the glorifying of humanity, and her pathway is illuminated not by the light of Christ, but the *ignes fatui* which have lured antecedent nations to the abyss? Flowery it is, and beautiful. We are captivated by new delights at every stage, and imagine that to-morrow will be as this day and more abundant, though experience utters no voice but that of warning which we heed not, and Scripture reiterates its threatenings but to be scorned.

But our time is not yet. I look for estoppals and re-actions. The sea ebbs and flows during its appointed time. Neither the North nor the South is yet ready for dissolution. They could not effect it now. There is too much at stake for both, for all, to admit of any violent disruption, and nothing but violence could part us. There is too much in jeopardy, not only of principle which we are losing sight of, but of property which we hold in more account, and of safety and happiness which are above all price. We start back when we look into the chasm of disunion. The boldest quail before its unimaginable terrors. Harper's Ferry is a providential omen enough to scare all but the hopelessly insane. Those bewildered men who have played consciously or unconsciously into the hand of fanatics, and driven such men as Brown to the gallows and Gerritt Smith to the Asylum, will retreat, with as much grace as possible, from their false positions. They will, indeed, shoot back their harmless arrows as they fly, and persuade whom they can that not they but their adversaries have been at fault for the murderous foray. But their zeal will slacken, and many will go back to find the only effectual remedy for social evils in the old Gospel rather than the new specifics. The people yet are too wise and virtuous, or at least, too calculating, to encounter the crisis of revolution. The present flurry, like that of Southampton, will soon be over. Perhaps a few more Presidential campaigns will pass without violent disturbance. But the popular idol is not broken. The groves are not cut down. The high places yet smoke with unhallowed incense. New temptations will consequently arise, and 14 the demoralized forces of society will yield to more seductive influences or overwhelming onsets. Every successive fever of course weakens more the constitution, and the fatal paroxysm comes at last. The same law is upon nations as individuals, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The wise and good may defer the catastrophe, but cannot avert it; and they will have their



reward. But woo to the empirics who drug, and stimulate and sweat the patient, through all his stages, till the silver cord is loosed, and the golden bowl is broken. Would to God that we might have the balm of Gilead, and the Physician who is there. But he comes not to reluctant homes. He administers not till unhallowed specifics are renounced. There is no fellowship between Christ and Belial, whose children crucify their Redeemer, and make Barabbas—the robber—the murderer—their hero, their Saviour and their God.

But whenever dissolution comes it will be general, not between the South and North only, but the confederation. For it is not supposable that in such an issue all classes will be equally recreant to first principles, or to the old covenants which have bound us so long together. The lawless and the malignant passions which should provoke the fatal controversy would meet resistance. Radical phrenzy on the one hand, would stir up conservative indignation on the other. These exasperated forces would for various reasons, have recruits from the right or left of the before confused and unresolved masses. Every State and town, and district, and family would quarrel on its own account, and every one of these with every other one. Battlements would be erected on every border, and the fairest heritage which God ever gave to man would be laid waste. The bread of the West, the raw material of the South, and the manufactures and commerce of the North would destroy each other, and three millions of vagrant, lawless, starvelling blacks, if it were possible for them to survive the havoc, would be scattered everywhere to consume the fragments. Even dreaming of a perfect state would then cease, for the last and best experiment of rational freedom would have failed, the last spot of earth fitted for it become desolate, and nothing could rise up from the ruin but 15 POWER—the power that puts chains on maniacs—that compels the children of broken covenants, and wasted inheritance, and prostituted blessings, to grind in the mill for a poor subsistence, and vainly attempt the mirth and the songs of Zion in the remembrance of a lost Jerusalem. God save us from such a day.

But whether we have Democracy, anarchy, or despotism, we shall not be rid of slavery till the day of the Lord. Its existence depends not on forms of government, or philosophical speculations, or political manœuvres, or legislative enactments, or judicial decisions, except as these may temporarily change its name, aspects or conditions, or vary its locations. The world must live on to its appointed period. It can live, as things are, only as it has lived, more or less, with all varieties of race, character and condition. These will find their appropriate spheres and places, not according to mere human judgments, but by God's providential ordering of Shem, Ham and Japhet, agreeably to physical laws and the plan of moral government, in reference to the ends of the present probationary state. Wherever there is place or work for slaves, there they will be found. All things are fitted to one another, and general laws will have their course. Our only wisdom is to study them, and live under them, and by them, in subserviency to their mixed righteous and benevolent design. Without a



miracle, I see not but that slaves will yet be called for in New England, and by New England men—slaves having the attributes, if not the name of slaves, and possibly in worse conditions than we now complain of in reference to the South. Why not, if our present government should last another eighty years? For Yankees will not perform the menial work of life. They have higher aims. They aspire to knowledge, wealth and power. The imported free servants of Ireland and other countries, will soon be infected with Yankee independence, and have the means of living, above servile work, on their own freeholds! Then, who will be our servants? Shall we have Coolies, or Africans, to hew our wood and draw our water? And what form of government shall be over them but that which is adapted to their comparative rudeness and imbecility, and conservative of the general system? The children and grandchildren of our present Abolitionists may yet be first to institute a harder serfdom than has yet been known, unless, in deed, they should be compelled to sell themselves for bread, and suffer the proper chastisement of their fathers' sins for their rebellion against the government of God.

I may not have met, in this long letter, the point of your inquiries, as it lay in your own mind, and I could not meet it as I apprehended it, without a considerable circuit, as you have seen. Nor could I speak at all on such a subject without speaking honestly as I have judged. Uncertain sounds are treacherous in times of peril. If what I have said may be useful anyway, or anywhere, I shall not regret to have had the occasion from your obliging letter.

I am, very respectfully, Your obedient servant, N. LORD.